

## University of Dundee

### Methodology

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## METHODOLOGY

### Longitudinal, Participatory Research with Street Children and Youth in Sub-Saharan Africa

Briefing Paper 2 · March 2014

#### KEY POINTS

- To understand street children and youth's capabilities on the street a longitudinal approach is required.
- Street children and youth are the experts on their own lives and therefore research about their lives must be participatory.
- Participatory research also provides young people with a sense of ownership of the research and an opportunity to develop their own responses to the findings and outcomes.
- There are significant practical and ethical challenges that need to be carefully considered when engaging street children and youth in research.

#### INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

The global approach to the 'problem' of street children and youth ignores the significant proportion of children that never leave the street – the street is their home, their society and source of income. Young people on the street are characterised as 'out of place' (Connolly and Ennew, 1996) to be 'returned' to family or other environments of adult supervision. This creates a problematic view of children as a hazard or vulnerable 'on' the street but safe 'off' the street – a perspective that, even after much academic criticism, still persists and shapes policy on young people in African cities. Further, this perspective creates a barrier for young people on the streets to access and exercise their full set of rights (OHCHR, 2012; van Blerk, 2014). In reality, street children and youth's lives are highly complex. Their relationships with family, home and place suggest major fault-lines in current policy and approaches where it is not always appropriate to reintegrate young people into difficult family or community settings (van Blerk, 2012). Many young street dwellers continue to have a relationship with the street as adults, the street and informal settlements being part of their experience of urban life. While loaded with negative social meaning, the street and informal settlements of African cities have an important function to play in the lives of many living in poverty that can be extremely positive and should be harnessed to their advantage. Those young people

whose life trajectories mean that they remain on the streets deserve to be supported appropriately. This research explores street children and youth's capabilities as they grow up on the streets and seeks to engage their voices directly in order that we understand how they might be better supported.

#### RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

The aim of the research is to understand street children and youth's capabilities on the street and to seek better ways of supporting them to have adult lives that they have reason to value. To do this a series of research questions have been developed that specifically explore this issue in more detail:

1. How do street children in three diverse African cities (Accra, Bukavu and Harare) employ capabilities both in their daily and future lives?
2. In what ways do street children face difficulties as



they grow up on the streets? How might they be better supported?

3. What are the changes in policy and practice that are required for a better understanding of street children's needs?

## METHODOLOGY

The research draws on a refinement of Sen's (1999) and Nassbaum's (2000) capability approach framework and applies this to street life. The rationale here is that rather than focus on the vulnerabilities of young people on the streets we must explore their capabilities in order to learn more about their lives and how to support them more appropriately. Ten capability statements were developed through pilot research with street children and youth in Accra (see Briefing Paper 1 and Shand, 2014) and subsequently developed into clear statements accompanied by images. These were collated into booklets for use in the research (see right). The capabilities are issues that the young people raised as pertinent to their ability to have flourishing lives on the streets and form the framework for collecting and analysing data.

## COLLECTING PRIMARY DATA

The collection of primary data follows a participatory street researcher philosophy whereby the research team work with street workers and street youth in each country to undertake their own ethnographic research (see Blazek, 2011; van Blerk, 2013). Six research assistants (RAs), currently living on the streets, were selected in each country. The process of selection was participatory beginning with open information sessions on the research followed by a period of intense training. Some chose not to continue while others were unable to fully complete the training due to ongoing commitments. A second ethnographic training workshop then took place with the remaining young people in each country prior to finally being involved in the project. These workshops equipped them with research skills based on the core principles of observation, questioning, listening.

Due to relatively low levels of formal education among street children and youth in each of the three cities, a verbal approach was adopted to capture the views and experiences of participants. The researchers engage in weekly informal interviews with a project manager, who was also trained in ethnographic questioning and

### Ten Capability Drawings

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1. I have enough time to play
- 

2. I am able to move freely and be safe in my local area.
- 

3. I am able to realise my plans for the future.
- 

4. I am able to behave in ways that protect my health and wellbeing
- 

5. I am resilient in the face of problems that effect me
- 

6. I am able to earn enough money to meet my basic needs
- 

7. I frequently receive the support of friends
- 

8. Through work I can build assets for the future
- 

9. I usually have enough to eat
- 

10. I have access to shelter

listening skills. Through these interviews a street ethnography is captured, focusing on capabilities and following a network of 10 young people per researcher. This process is triangulated with focus groups allowing the inclusion of the voices of a larger number of street children and youth on specific capability themes. In addition, a baseline survey of all young people taking part in the project was conducted at the start and is repeated every year for the three year data collection period (with a fourth survey post-data collection), enabling longitudinal data to be systematically collected and triangulated against the ethnographic interviews. In total 66 young people in each of the three cities will participate in the project over a three year period, a total of 198 young participants.

## PARTICIPATION

The high level of participation in this project is innovative for work with street children and youth and it is important to draw out some further key considerations and the approach used for *Growing up on the Streets*.

### Why do we engage street children and youth in research?

Following theoretical ideas that young people, although constrained by societal structures, are active agents shaping their own lives, and taking a rights-based approach, we ascertain that street children and youth not only have the right to be involved in decisions that affect their lives but that they should be leading and directing their futures. Therefore the project is constructed around the participation of young people who are both investigators and informants in the research, working with researchers to determine the most appropriate outcomes.

### How do we engage street children and youth in research?

We followed an extensive process of informed consent and training. Project managers discussed the research with young people in open sessions and invited those who were interested with good communication skills to participate in training. Good performance in the training resulted in advanced training and an invitation to become a researcher. The process was negotiated with the group in participatory dialogue. Others were invited to join the network, baseline and focus groups.

## What are the benefits?

Participation recognises the unique knowledge and access that young people have to the places and communities of streets and informal settlements in each of the three cities. By enabling young people to lead and direct the process, with support both from the strategic team and their local project managers, we gain access to their lives through their eyes and interpretation. From their perspective, training in new skills, a contribution to living expenses, and an opportunity to feed into research that seeks to inform and change policy locally and internationally, all add up to a strong commitment to the process.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of raw data from ethnographic interviews, focus groups and baseline surveys is an important part of the research design. A robust and comprehensive process of coding qualitative data has been set up using the qualitative data analysis package NVivo. Weekly interviews and focus groups are recorded, transcribed and translated confidentially in each country. Files are then sent to the University of Dundee, uploaded to NVivo and descriptively coded for capabilities, individuals and other emerging themes. The second stage of this process will be further analytic coding linking the findings to theory and triangulating across methods. The NVivo package helpfully also allows the researchers to examine themes in depth; to explore across countries; and to follow individual young people over the three year data collection process. All data is anonymised before any findings are released.

## ETHICS

The research has a strong commitment to undertaking socially just and ethical research. The project developed an ethical framework based on international guidelines for working with young people and the extensive experience of the research team (see Young and Barrett, 2001). The framework is signed and adhered to by all involved in the project from director to project manager, researcher, transcriber and participant. The framework considers, and sets standards, of the following principles: privacy and confidentiality; anonymity; benefits and costs; harm or impact on young people; informed consent; ownership; selection and inclusion; funding; information sharing; ending the project; and dissemination. Full ethical approval was also gained

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from the University of Dundee Research Ethics Committee.

## SOME CHALLENGES

The innovative and participatory nature of the research is ground-breaking by involving street youth as researchers, yet it creates a number of significant practical and ethical challenges that affects the stability of the project. Some examples include:

### Mobility

Participants may move around and away from the city. Keeping track is a challenge and an important evidential outcome from the research.

### Changes in social relationships

As young people grow up they will form new relationships, affecting the social groups that they are observing. Monitoring these changes are important for understanding life on the street but may create discontinuities in data collection.

### Confidentiality

Participants provide information into the research that could place them and others at risk. Maintaining confidentiality among research participants and through effective data management is a challenge.

### Environmental and political change

Young people on the street are highly vulnerable to rapid changes in their environment from 'clearance' policies of city councils through to the impact of civil conflict. These affect both the safety of young participants and also the viability of the research.

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